

SECURING OUR HEALTH SYSTEM FOR THE FUTURE

CANADA'S UNIVERSAL HEALTHCARE system is putting enormous pressure on provincial and federal treasuries at a time of fiscal deficits. Healthcare costs are rising as a percentage of GDP due to our aging society and healthcare inflation. Our existing health coverage is both unsuited to our country's current health needs (focused on acute rather than chronic care) and uneven across the country. Several groups – First Nations, older people with chronic conditions, those with significant pharma costs and no private drug coverage, and the victims of lapses in medical safety – are particularly ill-served.

Such problems are not unique to Canada. Healthcare costs are rising faster than GDP in all developed countries, which certainly suggests that there will be no easy solutions in this area. Nevertheless, the papers in this section lay out clear options for moving forward in a way that will ensure that Canadians in 2020 and beyond will have access to the healthcare services they need and want.

All of our healthcare contributors are firmly in support of a continued universal public healthcare system for Canada and all highlight the leadership role that the federal government must play in healthcare. While healthcare delivery remains a provincial responsibility, our authors are of the view that the federal government has a key function in focusing constructive public attention and debate on healthcare and in projecting a vision of a better health system for Canada.

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Change is needed in our health system not only because of financing issues, but also because of the unevenness of coverage between provinces and groups. Our health system was designed for earlier times. Recognizing this we must make decisions that make it more relevant to the challenges of today, most notably chronic illness and the high cost of outpatient drugs (and variability of coverage across the country). Today, too many healthcare decisions are played out in the public arena and taken in response to public pressure, rather than being based on critical evaluation of need, the efficacy of treatments and an appropriate strategic direction for a system that will always be financially constrained.

The federal government has a key function in focusing constructive public attention and debate on healthcare

The 2014 federal-provincial healthcare negotiations should focus on real health outcomes and finding ways to develop a patient-centred network of providers that is truly accountable to patients. Allowing the negotiations to get bogged down in discussion of the minutiae, or hijacked by those who would prefer accountability to be clouded, would be a missed opportunity for all Canadians.

Raising more money for healthcare will certainly be controversial, but if we want to maintain a world-class system, we will have to pay for it.

All authors identify the need for concrete change in the way our public health system operates. **Mark Stabile** focuses on the requirement for better evaluation of which medical procedures we will fund. **Philippe Couillard** is concerned with bringing physicians into the management of the system and ensuring that innovation in health provision is both effectively analyzed and rewarded. **Francesca Grosso and Michael Decter** focus on the need for simple indicators, better

evidence-based decision-making and a systems approach that allows health personnel to move seamlessly between care settings.

The two papers that address the issue of funding both reject user fees and argue in favour of new, health-specific social insurance premiums. Raising more money for healthcare will certainly be controversial, but if we want to maintain a world-class system, we will have to pay for it. This will take a societal consensus that can only be achieved with federal government leadership, real explanation of the options and costs and much better accountability to the public.

Efficiencies are important, but not on their own sufficient to carry our health system into the future. For in 2020 we hope to have in place not just a patched-up healthcare service, but a truly regenerated system that is well-positioned to adapt as we advance. ■